



## **Laurretta Kress**

**(1863-1955)**

*First woman physician and surgeon to practice in Montgomery County*

Laurretta Eby grew up in Buchanan, Michigan. After teaching elementary school children in Buchanan for several years, she moved to Detroit to become both the billing clerk and book keeper for a manufacturing pharmaceutical company. In 1884, she married Daniel Kress, and moved to Canada. A very devoted and strict Christian, Laurretta Kress influenced her husband not only to quit drinking and smoking but also to join and became an active member of the First Baptist church. The couple returned to Michigan and Daniel Kress became the pastor of the First Baptist church at Davisonville until 1887, the year that he resigned over an internal debate with his congregation about which day the Sabbath should be celebrated.

Laurretta and Daniel Kress moved to Battle Creek, Michigan, where the Adventist church had its headquarters. There, Daniel attended the Seventh Day Adventist College to obtain his license to minister. During their stay in Battle Creek, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, director of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, recruited both of them to study medicine at the Sanitarium and later at Ann Arbor. Sanitariums were a very popular phenomenon in the late 19th century.

The Kresses began their studies at the Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1890 for a year and continued for the following three years at Ann Arbor, where the sanitarium had a dormitory for medical students. With two small daughters, the Kresses combined their studies with work to pay for their education. Laurretta Kress became the kitchen supervisor at the dormitory. Unable to pay for her studies, she acquired a loan from Kellogg to continue her medical education. Kellogg also arranged for the caring of the Kress children. During these years, Daniel Kress went to Chicago for a medical mission. He opened a shelter that provided medical and drug addiction services.

Laurretta and Daniel Kress both graduated in May 1894. They returned to Battle Creek, where they opened their home to many adopted children. After a five-year stay in Battle Creek, the Kresses began their travels to establish sanitariums following the criteria of Battle Creek. In 1899, after finding new homes for all their adopted children, they moved to London to provide lectures on medical issues. Daniel Kress became the editor of a health journal, *Life and Health*, and Laurretta Kress gave cooking classes. On September 2, 1899, the Kresses opened a sanitarium twenty miles from London, free from smoke and dust, that offered cooking, health classes and lectures for patients. A few days after the opening of the sanitarium, the Kress' fifteen-year-old daughter died. In addition, Daniel Kress became anemic. The family decided to return to the United States. However, a year later, the Kresses made arrangements to go to Australia to work at a small hospital at Cooranbong, where Laurretta Kress became its manager. In December 1, 1902, the Wahroonga sanitarium was opened in Sydney. Both Daniel and Laurretta Kress were responsible for the management of the sanitarium. That same year, a son was born. At an early age, he fell down from a high chair. The fall left him with permanent brain damage.

After establishing two sanitariums overseas, the Kresses moved to the Washington D.C. area in 1907 to manage a Washington sanitarium and hospital. Founded by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the sanitarium was located in the then rural and isolated town of Takoma Park overlooking Sligo Creek. The "San," as it was popularly known, had rooms for 40 patients and a staff of 12. Daniel Kress became the first medical director of the Takoma Park sanitarium, and Laretta Kress one of the staff doctors. Laretta Kress established office hours to see women patients.

The Washington sanitarium was the oldest medical facility in Montgomery County, and the location where the first woman physician in the county practiced. Later the campus enlarged to include Washington Missionary College. The hospital changed its name in 1973 to Washington Adventist Hospital. The "San" was demolished in 1982, after years of debate between the city of Takoma Park and the owners of the "San," the Washington Adventist Hospital.

In 1916, Laretta Kress opened a maternity ward known as the "Kress Maternity and Children's Hospital." This ward was an independent unit with its own physicians and nurses, but being part of the sanitarium, it also could use the medical, surgical and nursing staff of the "San." Directed and managed by Laretta Kress, the "Kress Maternity and Children's Hospital" exclusively treated expectant mothers and children. During her hospital career, Laretta Kress delivered more than 5,000 babies. During her years at the "San," Laretta Kress combined her practice with her teaching career. She traveled with her husband around the country giving health lectures at Adventists hospitals and churches.

On July 9, 1943, the date of their 50th wedding anniversary, the Kresses had a party at their house in Takoma Park inviting all the families of all babies she had delivered during her hospital career. More than 600 guests attended the party. The many friends present at the party presented the Kresses an honorary degree which read L.L.D. for "Life Lovingly Dedicated." Laretta Kress and her husband retired in Orlando, Florida, where the Adventist church created "The Kress Memorial Church" in honor of their work as "pioneers in the Adventist medical work." Laretta Kress died in 1955.

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## **SOURCES:**

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- Historic Takoma, Inc.
- Pearle Peden, Hand in Hand. A Biography of Drs. Daniel and Laretta Kress, Nashville: Southern Publishing Association (1968).
- Washington Adventist Hospital 90 Years: 1907-1997